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PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHDIR #0016/01 0901319
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P R 301319Z MAR 08
FM IRAN RPO DUBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0249
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHDIR/IRAN RPO DUBAI 0242

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SUBJECT: QALIBAF -- A CHALLENGER FOR THE IRANIAN PRESIDENCY IN 2009?

REF: RPO DUBAI 0008, 0012, 0013, 0014, 0015

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(SBU) Summary: Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf has made a reputation for himself as an efficient technocrat during his tenure thus far as mayor of Tehran. In both his domestic and international trips and interviews, Qalibaf appears to be deliberately presenting himself as the anti-Ahmadinejad. The rivalry between the two, both former IRGC, is widely known and has been noted in the Iranian press, largely in the context of turf battles over the Tehran municipality. Although Qalibaf has not yet definitively declared he will run again in the 2009 presidential race, after his failed bid in 2005, his public statements and appearances all strongly suggest he will. Most observers take it as a foregone conclusion.

2.(SBU) Summary continued: Qalibaf has done much in recent months to raise his international profile, including travel to the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos, where he met world leaders, and his trip to Baghdad, just days in advance of President Ahmadinejad's visit. He has also given several interviews to prominent Western media outlets. Although Qalibaf appears to be successfully burnishing his external reputation as a pragmatic modernizer and his internal reputation as an effective manager, it is too early to determine his prospects for 2009, including the crucial issue of support from the Supreme Leader. And despite his comment in his Times interview that it is wrong to think there is a "dominant" desire for confrontation in Iran, it is also too early to determine whether a Qalibaf presidency would result in changed government policy. End summary.

Qalibaf seeks to raise his international profile

3.(C) Without clarifying why he is seeking out international attention, Tehran mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf has been raising his international profile with trips abroad, meetings with world leaders, and interviews in prominent Western press. Qalibaf appears to packaging himself as the anti-Ahmadinejad, i.e. a pragmatic modernizer, not an ideologue. At the same time, he is not straying far from conservative ranks inside Iranian politics, joining Ali Larijani and Mohsen Rezaie in forming an

alternate conservative list in the recent Majles elections (reftels). By no means is he sliding over to the reformist camp. He also distances himself from centrists close to Expediency Council chair Rafsanjani. When IRPOff asked an Iranian political analyst why Qalibaf is not politically linked to Rafsanjani - given his longstanding reputation as leader of pragmatic technocrats - the contact responded that Qalibaf would avoid links to Rafsanjani so as not to lose the favor of the Supreme Leader, who fears Rafsanjani as a rival.

4.(C) Contacts consistently rate Qalibaf as an excellent mayor, far superior to Ahmadinejad and better than Rafsanjani ally Gholam Hossein Karbaschi, who was mayor from 1988-98 but left in a financial scandal.

5.(C) Since the beginning of 2008, Qalibaf has given interviews to three major Western press outlets: the Financial Times (January 8), British newspaper The Times (March 14), and Time Magazine (March 18). One contact said it was remarkable in the context of conservative politics in Iran that Qalibaf in his January 8 Financial Times interview named (among others) an American city -- New York -- as one model he used in running Tehran.

6.(SBU) In January, Qalibaf attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, where he met with several international figures including UK foreign secretary David Miliband and Swiss president Pascal Couchepin. Qalibaf expressed interest in Miliband during his March 14 Times interview, saying he thought a new generation of politicians was emerging in the West.

7.(SBU) In late February, Qalibaf traveled to Iraq, only days before President Ahmadinejad's much-publicized visit there. While his visit was touted as forging municipality links between Iraqi cities and Tehran, Qalibaf also met with senior Iraqi government officials including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih, Deputy President Adel Abdul Mahdi, as well as Baghdad mayor Sabir al-Isawi. According to Iranian press, leader of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council

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(SIIC) Abdulaziz al-Hakim hosted a dinner for Qalibaf during his visit.

8.(C) Even more notably, Qalibaf -- but not Ahmadinejad -- met with Grand Ayatollah Sistani while in Iraq. Ahmadinejad's original travel plans included Najaf and Karbala, but in the end, he only visited Baghdad. (Note: One contact recently noted that Sistani is very influential among Iranians who consider themselves religious but are dissatisfied with the current political regime in Iran. End note.) While in Iraq, the Tehran mayor pledged his city's assistance on projects to rebuild Baghdad, Najaf, and Karbala, and announced that Tehran and Baghdad were setting up four joint working groups on engineering, traffic and urban transportation, education, and cultural services.

Biographical background

9.(U) Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf served as an IRGC officer during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, following which he was appointed by then-IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaie as head of the IRGC Air Force in 1997 to an open source biography. Qalibaf remains a licensed pilot, piloting Iran Air commercial flights on a regular basis in order to keep his license current. Supreme Leader Khamenei appointed Qalibaf head of the Law Enforcement forces (LEF, the national police) in 1999.

10.(U) Qalibaf was among the 24 IRGC commanders who warned then-President Khatami in a July 1999 letter that if he did not act to control student protests at Tehran University, they would take matters into their own hands. In contrast to this hard-line approach, Qalibaf's 1999-2005 tenure as LEF chief reportedly saw fewer incidents of police harassment of students.

As head of the LEF, Qalibaf won public praise from the Supreme Leader and even from some reformist quarters for handling student protests in 2003 without excessive use of force by police, although he also accused some reformist MPs of inciting the student rioters.

11.(SBU) Following his unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 2005, he succeeded Ahmadinejad as mayor of Tehran (a position appointed by the city council). If pro-Ahmadinejad supporters had done better in the 2006 municipal elections, Qalibaf would have likely lost his position, but he retained it.

12.(C) Comment: In his March 14 Times interview, Qalibaf said, "I would like the West to change its attitude to Iran and trust Iran and rest assured that there's an attitude in Iran to advance issues through dialogue." He added that it was wrong to think that there is a "dominant" desire for confrontation and conflict in Iran. That statement appears to represent a clear attempt by Qalibaf to differentiate himself from Ahmadinejad in the eyes of the international community, and to present himself as a less antagonistic alternative to Iran's current president. While there appears to be significant disaffection towards Ahmadinejad among conservatives, Qalibaf risks alienating the right-wing if he appears too "soft" on the West. One Western diplomat in Tehran told IRPOff that a Qalibaf associate who was involved in his 2005 presidential campaign has since turned away from Qalibaf, saying he is not hard-line enough. Qalibaf's Western-style presidential campaign (including, for example, stylish campaign posters targeting the youth audience, and photo ops of Qalibaf in aircraft cockpits) in 2005 generated criticism from the hard right.

13.(C) Comment continued: Of critical importance for Qalibaf's likely presidential bid will be the support of the Supreme Leader. When Qalibaf ran in the 2005 presidential elections, some believe he initially had Khamenei's support, but that Khamenei switched his support at the last minute to Ahmadinejad.

Some observers have attributed this perceived change by Khamenei to the fact that Qalibaf ran a very Western-style presidential campaign; others claim that Khamenei's son Mojtaba pushed Ahmadinejad to the forefront. In any case, Qalibaf will need the support of the conservative elite in Iran for a successful presidential bid in 2009. If Qalibaf decides to challenge Ahmadinejad for the presidency next year, he will need to calibrate all his international and domestic steps to rally conservative support at home.

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